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A Healthy German Nationalism Germans have earned the right to pride in country.

Steve Chapman | July 5, 2012

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On a recent visit to Shanghai, I stopped along the grand riverfront promenade that runs through the city's downtown and, from that single vantage point, counted 31 Chinese flags visible at various places. The Chinese love their national flag, a handsome red rectangle with one large gold star and four smaller ones.

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Germany

They're not alone in patriotic enthusiasm, as Americans prove on the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Flag Day and every other day. Israelis are keen on displaying their banner. Mexicans, ditto. Even the modest Canadians are not averse to flying the Maple Leaf.

There is one country I've been, though, where flag displays seemed to be regarded as undesirable: Germany. I spent six weeks in Berlin in early 2006, and each time I saw the tricolor of black, red and gold, I was surprised, because it happened so rarely. Aside from government buildings, in fact, the flag was practically invisible.

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It's no secret why. Flags are associated with nationalism, and Adolf Hitler gave German nationalism a bad name that still lingers. The burden of historical guilt tends to discourage Germans from taking pride in their country, much less expressing that pride overtly.

I visited Seoul when my kids were in grade school and brought them back shirts adorned with the South Korean flag. When I went to Germany a couple of years later, I found other sorts of gifts. It seemed to me that wearing a shirt with a German flag on it in the United States was just asking for trouble.

During my stay, several Germans told me they felt no great pride in being German. "I feel more European than German" was a common sentiment. They had internalized that the key to Germany's postwar success has been de-emphasizing its Germanness.

But that inclination may be changing. In the European debt crisis, Germans have been willing to demand their way far more than they customarily do. A couple of weeks ago, we all saw a photo of Chancellor Angela Merkel at a soccer match in Poland, wildly cheering the Germans' defeat of Greece, whose government she had rescued only with great reluctance.

Merkel has been called a Nazi in Greece, but she didn't let that inhibit her. Nor did it silence the German fans, who jeered at the Greeks, "Without Angie, you wouldn't be here!"

Apparently, their fiscal restraint and economic health have imbued Germans with a bit more pride and even assertiveness. The flag is no longer invisible. In a spectacle brought on by the European soccer championship, reports The Economist magazine, "the entire country is swathed in black, red and gold."

This trend began in 2006, when the World Cup was held there, giving Germans a chance to discover the joys of patriotic face paint. By 2009, a survey found, twice as many people were proud to be German as in 2001. At the time, University of Hohenheim sociologist Eugen Buss said, "The German soul, bruised and discredited by the Nazi era, has to a large degree been healed."

That's something to welcome, because it has come about the right way: not by forgetting or excusing the horrors of the past but by coming to grips with them. It's hard to think of any people who have gone to greater lengths to acknowledge the crimes committed by their forebears or to remember the victims.

It's not unusual to stumble across plaques and signs noting awful events from Hitler's time. There is a Holocaust monument in the middle of Berlin. But it's not called the Holocaust monument. It's called, with unsparing candor, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

Germans have earned the right to pride in country. Since the destruction of the Third Reich, they have established a prosperous market economy, a robust democracy and a tradition of cooperation with their neighbors.

They have not only left Nazism behind but also overcome communism, which for more than 50 years ruled in the eastern portion of the country. They reunited a country divided by the Cold War -- and they did it without going bankrupt, suffering political upheaval or inducing panic in countries they had once occupied.

As Germans become more comfortable with patriotic expression, they will disturb some people in Europe and beyond. But flying one's flag is normal behavior. And if we know anything about the German-caused catastrophes of the 20th century, it's that normal behavior was not the problem.

Steve Chapman blogs daily at newsblogs.chicagotribune.com/steve_chapman.

Steve Chapman is a columnist and editorial writer for the Chicago Tribune.

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